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FEATURE

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CONTACT CENTRES - Close contact

The telecoms sector is one of the most highly competitive industries, with one third of its customers churning every year. So how can service providers differentiate themselves from the competition and minimise the impact of churn on the bottom line? Ofer Yourvexhal explains how major organisations are meeting challenges head on through an integrated desktop approach that ensures consistent high-quality customer service

Customer churn is one of the greatest challenges for any organisation, and none more so than the telecoms industry. The mobile phones market reached saturation point some time ago and the plethora of pricing options, different service plans and new phone models available causes customers to swap suppliers on a regular basis.

The old adage that 'service sells' has never been more applicable and good customer service can help telecoms providers hold on to their customers and provide a value added service. Take, for example, the news that UK cable giant NTL is acquiring Virgin Mobile. The Virgin name was favoured for the new company as it offered instant consumer brand appeal, but more importantly because of its renowned excellent customer service. So how can other service providers meet the growing challenge of Virgin's customer service offering? Answer? Through enhancing their own customer service.

High quality customer service

Traditionally contact centres have often been referred to as 'cost centres' and a necessary business expense, however, if used correctly they can have a significant impact on customer retention. They can add real market value and prove to be a successful business tool.

The key to keeping customers happy and ensuring that they stay with your company, is to provide them with the information they need, when they need it. This is often easier said than done. Agents frequently have to access many different databases to find all of the relevant information in order to satisfy a customer enquiry. The answer lies in an integrated desktop, which enables agents to access all the information they need through a single screen, including product details and availability as well as customer histories. This means that they do not need to separately navigate the many silos of data that may already exist within your business – freeing up agents' time to provide truly personalised service.

In addition to customer churn, agent retention is also a great obstacle to overcome for the telecoms industry. Research from global market research firm, Gartner, has shown that anything from wages to working environment can be responsible for staff turnover and with staff churn rates reaching a high of 60 per cent, and with the contact centre industry set to expand to over 37,000 by the end of the year, this churn figure will undoubtedly rise.

Agents are the most significant cost within a contact centre, accounting for up to 80 per cent of the overall budget. They are also its most valuable asset, and possibly the only contact that customers have with your business, so it's essential they are effective and reflect an accurate image of the organisation. Agents have a significant value and can generate additional revenue for your contact centre, but to do this, they need support.

The best way to help agents become more productive is to simplify the processes they carry out on every call, every day. Again thanks to an integrated desktop that provides a single view of the customer, agents are able to have all the relevant information at the right time. This enables them to optimise the critical part of the call when they actually engage with the customer.

Streamlining the first third of a call – which is needed for identification and verification, and so is not productive – also helps the agent to be effective. This should include ensuring that any information gathered in an IVR is translated to the desktop and put in front of the agent. When the agent actually takes over the call, for the final two thirds of it, they will be supported with that information so they can deliver a quality experience for the customer.

How should agents be measured?

In order to get the most out of their agents, businesses need to assess exactly what it is they are looking for from them. Every contact centre is different and will value certain metrics over others, so you must first define what areas of productivity are key for your agents. If cross- and up-sales are KPIs, then measure those, but if agents have no involvement with sales, it is senseless to measure them. Instead, define what is important for each agent to achieve, whether its call volumes, average handle times, or first time resolution. Then the processes that are put in place can reflect these targets and make them more easily achievable.

Cross- and up-sales are a good metric to monitor in order to gain an insight into the productivity of your agents. It's obvious that the bottom line will improve significantly if every agent achieves an

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increase in these areas. The best way to enable agents to do this is to empower them with all the information that they need to do their jobs well. If an agent can access customer information – including purchase history – product information and special offers, all on the same screen, then they have all the knowledge that they need to complete these sales.

The important thing to remember is that agent and customer churn happens and will continue to do so, especially in today's competitive market. However, by optimising agent processes and giving staff the right equipment to do their jobs well, businesses can see churn levels – for both agents and customers – drop.

Ofer Yourvexhal is Senior Vice President of International Sales, Jacada

Putting theory into practise – Vodafone UK

Vodafone UK, a member of the world's largest cellular community, faces the problem of customer churn every day and like most service providers, it has a department that is dedicated to retaining customers. The Vodafone customer retention department implemented a unified desktop in order to simplify the processes for its agents. Through the non-invasive integration of their systems and processes, Vodafone's agents have been able to reduce call time, while still providing high levels of quality customer service– especially in terms of customer 'saves'. The result is that they can now complete more calls in the space of a day, which translates directly into more customer 'saves'.

Jacada offers a unified desktop to enable agents to access all the information needed through a single screen, including product details and availability, as well as customer histories. Using its unified desktop, Vodafone enabled its agents to navigate the many separate silos of data that existed within the business. The agents only needed to learn how to use one simple interface, which provides the key to the whole call-handling process.

By employing the Fusion process optimisation solution, Vodafone has cut the time of a successful retention call in half, and completely eliminated its call wrap-up process. Vodafone agents are better informed and now have the expertise and knowledge to deliver product, tariff, usage and industry information efficiently.

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